

BEYOND MERE ‘CONTROL’

Parenting/teaching tips with a focus on the teenager – “the transition to adulthood”

THE THREE PHASES OF PARENTING

1. SENSATE LEARNING PHASE – Teaching the child to trust the parent

For approximately the first six years of a child’s life (it varies from child to child, and girls seem to develop earlier than boys) it relates to its world in largely **sensate** ways – i.e., what come through its primary senses. Parents who rely primarily on the processes of ‘reasoning’ with children of this age group will be largely disappointed. The child may well be able to enter into such conversation and give the ‘appearance’ of reasoning, but they are more likely relating to the ‘emotional content’ than to the logical content. During this age the child is learning the basic skills of survival through contact with his or her environment – which is sometimes painful, but not ‘punishing’, i.e., the child does not see this ‘painful’ learning as ‘payback’. However, you cannot let a child learn everything by ‘natural cause and effect’. For example, you cannot let a child learn ‘not to run on the road’ by natural cause and effect. Hence a parent may need to deliver a much less painful ‘aversive consequence’ as an ‘example’ of such natural consequences when a child runs near a road. Some types of self-destructive or manipulative behaviours will not simply ‘go away’ if ignored. Hence, learning **during this early phase of a child’s life** may sometimes be painful in ‘sensate’ ways [and if appropriately used, such experiences will rarely, if ever, be either needed or useful beyond this phase]. A child will suffer no more [and often much less] long term damage from such painful experiences than from any of its other ‘natural’ painful learning experiences, **so long as such consequence are reasonable, and NEVER delivered in an aggressive, malicious, or otherwise damaging fashion**. Even a casual look at how animals teach their young to survive can be instructive. It is not the severity of consequences that teach a child, it is the certainty of those consequences.

A PARENT SHOULD NEVER ATTEMPT TO DISCIPLINE A CHILD IF YOU THEY ARE ANGRY, OR ARE EXPERIENCING ANY REAL DIFFICULTY IN CONTROLLING THEIR OWN EMOTIONAL REACTIONS. IF THEY DO, THEY ARE LIKELY TO CAUSE MORE HARM THAN GOOD! FIND YOUR OWN ‘CALM’ – THIS IS THE FIRST LAW OF ALL EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE.

2. CONCRETE LEARNING PHASE – Teaching the child about what works and how to get along with others

Cognitive development during approximately the next six years of a child’s life will focus more on the *concrete phase* of learning as they come to understand the ‘norms’ of their social groupings – family, school, church or society. If you have laid an appropriate foundation in the first phase of the child’s development, the child will need very few consequences in order to learn during this phase. Discipline processes can also be more easily related to the logical consequences of the child’s own behaviour e.g., a disruptive child may be required to spend time apart from the group to ‘rethink’ their behaviour; a messy child may simply be required to clear up the mess before they are permitted to watch TV, or some such other desired activity. Whatever the consequences, they should be meaningful and with clear ‘alternatives’, i.e., ‘if’ you ... ‘then’..., rather than, ‘you **must** do such and such...’. Both positive and negative consequences can be used in such fashion.

2. ABSTRACT or ‘TRANSITIONAL ADULT’ LEARNING PHASE – Teaching the ‘transitional adult’ about how to become a good decision-maker, by NOT making their decisions for them, nor owning the physical or emotional consequence of those decisions!

From around twelve years of age onward the child is moving into an abstract thinking phase that will allow it a much greater ability to understand the *natural* ‘cause and effect’ basis of its world, and the more universal ethical and moral principles of life. This is the ‘transition’ phase from childhood to adulthood, the time when the child needs to take on the full responsibility of becoming his or her own decision maker. This does not happen over-night and parent figures need to collaborate with the young person in making the transition. They will do this best by ‘getting in first’ and ‘**giving**’ over as many

decisions as *safely* possible to the young person, **along with the ownership of any consequences**, in a context of good-will and trust – before the young person ‘takes’ decisions out of the parents hands! When the young person blunders in the process of learning to make such decisions – as they almost certainly will on occasions – they will learn from such experiences more quickly and more appropriately if they do so in a context of parental acceptance and good-will. Parents almost need to put a big sign up on the wall that states *‘No-one in our family, who makes a mistake, will be treated as if they did it deliberately. All mistakes will be viewed as learning experiences - even if the learning is a bit tough a times!’* Reality ‘bites’, but it is also an effective teacher if the young person is allowed to face the ‘reality’ and does not have to face an angry parent or parent figure as well.

Parents of teenagers need to sit down with their ‘young adults’ and talk with them about the ‘new deal’ of ‘contractual life’, i.e., adults live by ‘social and material contract’ with others in their environment. The years of dependent ‘privilege’, where ‘things’ were provided simply because they were ‘children’, are coming to an end. The tough realities of ‘providing for oneself’ are beginning to sink into the psyche of the young adult and many parents have found the transition to be much smoother after they have discussed, in a climate of friendship [‘friends’, rather than ‘parent-child’] the new contractual arrangement. It is as difficult for most parents to ‘let go’ their sense of responsibility for the well-being of the offspring, as it is for the offspring to ‘pick up’ that responsibility. It must, however, be done as some point, and it is safer if the parent does indeed **willingly** ‘let go’ rather than waiting till such has been ‘taken off them’! It would almost be a good idea if parents and young adult went out for a party together to celebrate ‘giving up he role of being a parent’! This, of course, means that the young person, from then on is a [hopefully welcome!] guest in their home with all the normal respects that go between hosts and guests.

What about ‘peer pressure’? **Peer pressure** is largely due to the fact that young people do not ‘gravitate’ to the source of greatest love [which is almost always their parents], they ‘gravitate’ to the source of **greatest acceptance**, which, sadly, is often given more willingly by their peers than by their ‘worrying’ parents. One of the greatest gifts that a parent can give to a teenager is to believe in them, contrary to all the evidence that the teenager provides for the opposite! Unconditional love is an almost irresistible force, and many a teenager would have found it much easier to stand against the tidal pressures of their peers if they had felt secure in the regard parents who attempted to listen rather than attempted to ‘save’ them through good advice. Good advice is like good food; it is found to be most appreciated by the hungry – force feeding tends to make anyone ‘gag’!

A FEW TIPS FOR PARENTS DURING THE THIRD PHASE OF PARENTING

1. Establish an unshakeable and unconditional friendship relationship.

Our children, even our adult children, should never have to do anything or be anything to gain our friendship or love – even it is ‘tough love’. A climate of unconditional positive regard is fundamental to effective learning. When anger or hostility or personal disapproval such as “I’m disappointed in you!” or any other ‘withdrawal of regard,’ is used as a factor in gaining control, the young person learns to view themselves in that light and often responds with childlike passive compliance or aggressive open defiance and the use of reciprocal emotional blackmail. This ‘warfare’ is quite useless, and often very damaging, to both parties.

As far as possible, maintain an emotional environment where those around you feel secure and are glad to be with you. Be emotionally predicable. Many parents are afraid to ‘loosen up’ for fear that the young person will ‘take advantage’ of them, so they maintain an undercurrent of suppressed hostility, a sort of “don’t mess with me buddy, or I’ll bite your head off!” in order to keep ‘on top of the situation’. Keep an atmosphere of unshakeable good-will and the child will be gradually attracted by, and drawn to, the security of your inner strength.

2. Never attempt to use blame or guilt to get a change in behaviour.

Even though young adults need to learn, through consequences, the nature of personal responsibility, remember—children are **not personally guilty**—all their obnoxious behaviours are simply their unwittingly learned, though inappropriate ways, of fulfilling their legitimate needs.

The object of all training is to teach **responsibility, not guilt**. Children don't need to be encouraged to feel guilty or bad in order to increase their sense of responsibility. Consequences—natural & logical—in a climate of acceptance and love, teaches responsibility. People gain a sense of guilt when they live under the personally disapproving judgement of others, which they sense in all the non-verbal signs of rejection: anger, disappointment, frustration etc (eg. “you [or it] make/s me so angry when ...”). All such judgemental reactions tell the young adult that you see **them** as ‘bad’, and that their inappropriate behaviours have been viewed as deliberate and intentional. Any young adult reacts with ‘defence’ to such an attribution!

Every young adult needs to have someone ‘big hearted’ and understanding enough to view him or her as a wonderful and worthwhile human being. A young adult will find it much easier to ‘hear’ from someone who has shown that they love them **unconditionally** that some of their **learned** behaviours are not consistent with the ‘common good’ and therefore in need of change. Guilt inducing methods teach the young adult to focus on avoiding ‘blame’ rather than on acting sensibly and sociably. Such children can be slow to mature and may never fully mature into self-responsible adults. Guilt produces a degree of external conformity to ‘rules’, but never produces mature responsible behaviour.

It is ‘good parenting’ to be psychologically tough in **not** yielding to a young adult’s *manipulative* pressures, simply to gain their approval or to “keep them from being unhappy”. It is also ‘good parenting’ to remove from your own repertoire of response, **all** such emotionally manipulative pressures. Your gift of love and regard must be unconditional if you want your young adult to form a robust personality and stable character that is ‘Teflon coated’ against the myriad manipulative ‘pressurisers’ and emotional ‘blackmailers’ that each will meet during the course of his or her life.

3. **Focus on controlling your own behaviour—not the young adult's.**

Many parents/teachers lose control of their own behaviour in their attempts to control the behaviour of the young adult. In other words, the way the parent/teacher acts is not how they would prefer to act if they really felt they had a choice in the matter. Angry teachers/parents generally don't become angry because they enjoy being angry. Rather, they have simply *learned* anger [through no fault of their own!] as part of their method of control, even though, at the time, they may really believe that the situation has ‘made them angry’. As soon as you become angry, the young adult subconsciously gives **you** the ownership of **their** problem. They are then ‘dealing with you dealing with them’, when what they need to focus on is ‘dealing with their responsibility for choosing between behavioural options’. **AVOID ALL BATTLES OF WILL** in which your ill-will is pitted against the young adult’s ill-will – ie., who is going to give-in first! Offer a choice to them via the use of consequences that can be quickly administered and then continue with an attitude that indicates that all is still *well* between you and them.

When we focus on [and thereby hold ourselves responsible for] the characteristics and quality of **our response** to the behaviour of the young adult, rather than focusing on [and thereby hold ourselves responsible for] **THEIR** behaviour [for that is the their responsibility], we teach:-

(a) [by example] that self-control is one’s own personal responsibility and not the responsibility of another, and,

(b) that choosing to behave inappropriately will result in real consequences [natural or logical] that will be disliked **by the young adult**. In other words, let the young person [rather than the parent] be the one who experiences distress at the inappropriate behaviour and its negative results. When the young person finds that their behaviour and its natural/logical results are simply not worth it [it doesn’t even get an adult upset!!] then they will choose to give it up. But it is much harder for a young person to give up inappropriate ways of behaviour if someone else is angrily waiting and expecting the young person to change. There is something in human nature that simply doesn’t wish to change if someone else wants it to! Everyone desires to have a *sense* of being in charge of his or her own life, within the physical and social restrictions that have been recognised and accepted by his or her own conscience

and judgement. People who feel good about themselves find it easy to learn. This is true of people of all ages.

(c) the truth about emotions! That a lot of the negative emotions we experience in life are really just varieties of ‘autogenic suffering’ — learned ‘suffering’ used as manipulative behaviours that have been reinforced by short term results – i.e., they ‘worked’, in that they resulted in some evidence of control over others. In point of fact, most unhappiness is actually a learned attack upon oneself with the aim of holding others responsible for it and blackmailing them into changing, “I am hurting, and you did it to me. You are responsible for my negative feelings, I am not. And you should feel bad about what you are doing to me, so change so we can both feel good again”! The trouble is, of course, the young person grows up living [and dying] by the same deeply learned ‘myth’.

4. Don’t nag!

Repeating words, with exasperated emotion, but no real consequences, only teaches the young person to feel that their antisocial behaviour is **painful to you**. What they need to learn is that their antisocial behaviour is going to be **painful to them**—which it always is, in the long term, in the big world of reality! When young adults learn—through consequences, natural and logical—that their antisocial behaviour leads to negative feelings in them, not you, they will change. Once again, this is how the natural world teaches the young person to survive its many dangers—and it does so without using guilt.

5. Build your transitional adult’s sense of self-worth

Don’t criticise, condemn, or show **personal** disapproval. Don’t make a big deal out of a young person’s mistakes or failures. Deal only with things that are clearly ‘your business’. For example, I had a case where a mother, in tears, called me to tell me that her eighteen year old daughter had just stormed out of the house with a bottle of whisky, heading for town to make herself drunk. There had obviously been a ‘battle of wills’ and the parent [and young person] had lost. The conversation when something like this:

Phil: “Mum, can you actually stop her doing this?”

Parent: “No, [wailing]”

Phil: “Well, stop trying to”

Parent: “What sort of parent would I be if I didn’t TRY to stop her”

Phil: “Let me ask you again. Can you actually stop her, if she really has a will to do so?”

Parent: “I guess not”

Phil: “I had a talk with your daughter last week and she is actually quite a sensible young person, and you will find this out too, if you talk to her like you would talk to one of your best friends, but she revealed to me that she is in a battle of wills with you, and it seems to me that she is going to go out and make herself drunk, and act like an idiot, JUST TO PROVE TO YOU THAT YOU CANNOT CONTROL HER” Do you see what I am saying. You are part of the problem, and if you change YOUR part you will give her the best chance to change HER part”

Parent: “Then how should I respond”

Phil: “Well, I don’t know about ‘should’ but it might be more helpful if you acted as if the behaviour was perfectly normal and just said something like “Oh, OK darling, I will see you when you get home, just make sure that if you ‘throw up’ you make it to the garden, rather than in the house. Luv ya! Remember, we are talking about a legal adult here, who is actually not an idiot at all when she is at work and people treat her as if she was capable of being a sensible adult.”

Parent: “So, you are saying that I should approve of this sort of behaviour?”

Phil: “No, I am just saying that if you cannot stop something, don’t act and sound like you can, and in so doing find yourself playing toothless parent to their rebellious child. Reality, and ownership of that reality, is the great teacher in the transitional years, and this learning is SLOWED DOWN by parents attempting to do the impossible. Work on the quality of your relationship, and YOUR behaviour towards them, not the quality of THEIR behaviour, for that is their business and they will quickly come to see its consequences if you let go the ownership of them. Worry and anxiety is like voodoo, and does not help young people grow up to be responsible adults”

Teach the young person to evaluate his or her own behaviour, by NOT evaluating it for them. This does NOT mean to say that one should allow a young adult 'guest' in one's home, to act in such a fashion that we would never allow any other 'guest' to do. Impress upon the young adult that they are no longer a dependent child, but that you now view them as a responsible adult – and talk to them as if you actually believed it!

6. Don't encourage your young adult to justify their behaviour to you or to make excuses TO YOU, by your constantly asking "why" type questions! They don't know 'why' but they will soon tell you what they think you 'need' to hear.

Many parents ask 'why' in a demanding way that indicates that they are not really looking for a reason, but rather to get the young person to feel bad or stupid about what they have done. "Why the heck did you leave the door open when you came in", is not looking for a reason, but is really saying, "you dumb kid, can't you see how really stupid you are compared with me".

Remember, you don't need the young person to 'explain' why he or she has acted inappropriately [they won't know the real reasons anyway; but they will quickly make some up to avoid 'getting into trouble']; you simply need to work out some deal so that the two-way relationship will work better in the future.

7. Let young people know you are also human and experience difficulties [but don't dump on them!]. Ask for their opinions with a genuine desire to hear what they have to say.

Treat young people as equal human beings! Don't be afraid to say, "I'm sorry about that, I really blew it didn't I. It's not your fault I got angry, I must learn not to handle things that way. Perhaps we can go back over what happened without me getting angry this time." It's only your ego that stops you making such an admission, and the ability to get above your ego is a powerful learning experience for the young adult. It also reinforces the view that you are not in a 'battle of wills' with them.

8. Don't have all the answers. Help them with the process of discovery. Teach them how to go about making decisions.

Particularly in the teen years, parents need to stop trying to teach the young person things they already know but have not yet been willing to accept—having not yet fully learned the nature of reality. Some things are understood only through tough experience! As far as possible, take the risk of letting the young person learn from his or her own 'dumb mistakes' rather than always trying to get them to make the 'right' decision. Many a young adult has learned helplessness because of a parent's unwillingness to let them face failure. Teach them 'how' to learn from experience, but don't attempt to REPLACE their experience with your experience.

9. Model the quality of behaviour that you wish to teach.

Once again, don't expect a young person to have more self-control than you have. Just because YOUR 'loss of control' [in dealing with the young person's behaviour] looks more legitimate than THEIR 'loss of control' [in dealing with his or her world] doesn't mean to say that the young person will see it that way. Sub-consciously, your 'frustration response' legitimises their 'frustration response'—after all, you are the one who is teaching them how to deal with frustration! Its just that, to you, the THEIR frustration doesn't seem legitimate, whereas YOUR frustration does—but from THEIR perspective its the other way around! **Remember:** it is more important to teach the young adult the appropriate 'processes' for dealing with frustration, than with what they should see as frustrating.

10. Deal with selfish mannerisms long before they manifest into full blown behaviour patterns. Don't 'put-up-with' obnoxious behaviour until you can't stand it any longer.

This is pro-active rather than re-active parenting. Prevention is better than cure. Never allow a young adult to treat you with any less respect than you offer them. Let them know that they will **never** get 'satisfaction' from you unless they relate to you with pro-social behaviour. They will soon learn what works! Needless to say, perhaps, this does not mean that you take yourself so seriously that you don't engage in good humoured 'joshing' in an atmosphere of good will. If a young person says 'nasty' things to you, don't attack back or act as you're a victim. Simply, listen attentively, and then say, with all the genuineness that you can muster, and in an inquiring tone, something like "Oh, that's interesting darling, why are you telling me that?" or even "OK, I understand what you are saying, what do you want to happen as a result of that?" This focuses the attention away from any argument about the validity or prior 'cause' of the outburst, and towards the 'purpose' of the outburst. You can then negotiate.

11. Give information, not justification.

Justification is attempting to get the young person to accept your authority. If you attempt to do this, they can control you by not accepting your justification. When the young person says, for example, something like, "but why can't I have the car tonight", check to see if this is simply a request for information, or whether the young person is making a demand that you justify your right to own your own life and your own things [just as they are] at this point. The tone of voice will give the clue as to which it is. Freely give information; never give justification, because if you do you will have opened yourself up to manipulative game playing. Whenever you justify your 'rights' to another, you have lost the 'right' to do so, and are actually asking for the 'privilege' to have your 'rights' granted!

12. Think long term.

Always try to take into account the long term effects of your methods of training. Very often, methods of behaviour control that go for an immediate, fear based, response, get a short term 'gain'—the young person complies, albeit without a sense of ownership—in exchange for a long term 'pain'—the young person's desire to do so willingly gets less over time. The "law of diminishing returns", means that parents who use inappropriate processes to gain what they believe to be appropriate outcomes will find themselves resorting to increasingly 'heavy' methods to gain decreasing levels of compliance.

13. Listen with willing and active attention.

Attempt to listen actively—with non-verbals indicating a real desire to understand, eg., head nodding, eye contact, "ah hah", exploratory [not interrogatory] questions, etc.

14. Agree on roles within the home. As fellow adults there is a need for establishing a new foundation for the relationship, a 'new deal' so to speak.

This is a hard one, particularly for parents who think that the young person should just guess what they should do around the place. However, if you want to be able to give up the daily task of reminding, reminding, reminding, it is imperative to establish an agreement on both the roles [who does what, and the consequences of it all falling apart] and the methods for solving conflict without 'warfare'.

15. Recognise individual differences.

Do a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator [see www.keirsey.com, or www.personalitypage.com], or some other questionnaire, to give you insight into your own preferred style of decision making in life, and also to gain a greater appreciation of the wide variety of other 'legitimate' personal decision making styles. Get to know and understand the unique styles of your younger members and encourage them to develop in their most preferred style. This is about accepting individual differences in **personal style**, not individual differences in moral behaviour. A young person must always be encouraged to respect the rights of others—this is not optional. – and this is best done by constantly showing respect for them in both manner and ownership of THEIR life where it does not DIRECTLY have a negative impact on your life [and this does not include your imagined 'emotional need' for their compliance to your wishes!]

16. Give heaps of self-initiated positive attention.

The importance of parents giving demonstrative, self-initiated attention and affection, cannot be over emphasised. With parents, this should involve touch—plenty of hugs—and positive remarks. This personal attention should not just be related just to positive behaviours displayed by the young person, but should be given simply because the young person is alive and with you! A point of caution here; parents should be careful not to try to **pressure** their young person into returning this affection; “come on, gimme a hug”. Give the young person room to return this affection at his or her own initiative – don't look for it as this indicates emotional dependence and increases the chance of bringing rejection due to 'oversupply'. The young person should see that you give affection and attention **simply because you find it a pleasure to give it**, not because you want to get something from them in return. In other words affection should not be used as manipulation. **Of course, always give positive feedback when the young person initiates non-manipulative affection.**

17. Let consequences teach responsibility.

People learn from consequences - that are fair, just, and tough - in the context of unshakeable good will. Once you have explained [and if the young person is old enough, agreed on] the nature of consequences and you made it clear what will happen, **act**, don't nag! Don't give repeated warnings - don't count, don't threaten, don't raise your voice - just act, in a straightforward manner, without anger or show of frustration. If it comes to the 'crunch' – and if all the above is given a chance it shouldn't come to this – and you have to ask them to leave the home, or you feel that it is time for them to make the break from the 'feather bedding' of home, do it with love, not anger.

Once a consequence is given, the relationship should continue in good-will. It is important that a child deal only with the consequence and not with any ill-will or 'hard feelings' that you may mistakenly believe they have caused you. Remember that a person will quickly and effectively learn from those consequences that follow his or her **behaviour** to the extent that he or she experiences such consequences in a climate of unconditional acceptance, and that is free from the sort of blame that induces feelings of guilt and shame.

Why do some teenagers terrorise their parents? Because they have learnt it from them! Get out of the warfare!! Young people, deep down, feel dreadful when they get into warfare with their parents. Despite the 'tough front' they are actually terrified of their world and how to deal with it as an adult.

There greatest friendships that we can experience in this life is with our partners and with our children. It is a great tragedy that many parent lose this friendship during the transitional years between childhood and adulthood. Many parents experience the desperation of the lonely 'empty nest' years because they failed to maintain the friendship. Home can be a place where young people long to visit because they remember the 'good times'. My wife and I were greatly 'chuffed' when our daughters called one long weekend from their university situated in another state and said “can you two come down, we have more fun with you!” Wow, we knew then that something had worked.

18. Establish a contractual agreement with the young adult that shows respect for the rights of both parties

Any young person making their way into the adult world will take some time to understand what it actually means to be 'adult' – particularly the fact that **adults live by social contracts** rather than by blind obedience to a power figure. As an adult, **IF** I go to work and perform in an acceptable manner **THEN** they will pay me; **IF** I break the speed limit and get caught doing so **THEN** I will need to pay a fine, etc. In other words I am required to accept the terms of the various social contracts that I have with my society **OR** I will end up being removed from that society. To be 'adult' means that one's so-called 'freedom of choice' is clearly limited and tied to consequences that have, at least tacitly, been agreed upon as an adult member of society. Young people, driven by strong hormonal changes and hence moving into transitional adulthood, and who have been used to having their decisions overridden – for their own protection – often long to be allowed to make their own decisions. However, most young people, particularly young people who have had strong and protective parents, have **LITTLE** idea of the real nature of adult social contractual arrangement, and **HENCE** need to be taught what this actually means. This is best taught through a gradually process of establishing a social agreement between the young adult and the parents or guardians. It is established by an **AGREED-UPON IF—THEN** type process that respects the right of both parties **AND** is established in an environment of good-will. This will not be easy, but can be done if there is any good-will left in the relationship. An agreement that is autocratically passed down in a one-direction process is almost certain to fail.

Dr Phil Harker

